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SUBJECT: CODEL LEAHY MEETS WITH PM MALIKI, DISCUSSES
ELECTIONS, AGRICULTURE

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Classified By: Ambassador Christopher R. Hill for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).).

¶1. (C) Summary: Prime Minister Maliki told CODEL Leahy May 24 that Iraq wants to build a strong strategic relationship with the U.S., including through implementation of the Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA). He said that the January 2009 provincial elections had helped move Iraq beyond violence and sectarianism, and expressed optimism that the upcoming national elections would allow Iraq to discard the system in which government positions are allocated based on ethno-sectarian quotas, and establish a "true democracy" with majority rule. The PM also urged the CODEL to consider additional technical assistance to Iraq to help it modernize its agricultural system, suggesting that this be made a component of SFA implementation. End Summary.

National Elections Present an Opportunity

¶2. (C) Prime Minister Maliki met May 24 with Senators Patrick Leahy, Sheldon Whitehouse, and Mark Warner, accompanied by Ambassador Hill. Senator Leahy began by stressing that the new U.S. President and many new members of Congress maintain significant interest in Iraq. He asked PM Maliki what the PM expected to change in the next year in Iraq. Maliki said Iraq wants to strengthen its strategic relationship with the U.S., focusing on the Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) and areas such as science, culture, and agriculture. Regarding Iraqi elections, Maliki said that Iraq's experience with provincial elections was positive. While it is difficult to predict what will happen in the coming year, Maliki said Iraq needs to move forward as a unified country, with non-sectarian and non-ethnic based politics, based on fairness, justice, pluralism and democracy.

¶3. (C) The PM said that provincial elections were successful in helping Iraq move beyond violence and sectarianism. He expressed hope that national elections scheduled for early 2010 would build on this experience. Maliki also said he hoped that a new Council of Representatives (CoR) would pursue a national, non-sectarian, agenda.

¶4. (C) Senator Warner asked PM Maliki about progress in building the capacity of ministries, and whether the PM felt he had adequate control over critical ministries such as Defense and Interior. Maliki noted that the current Iraqi government was built on a quota system in which positions were allocated based on sect, ethnicity and party. For that reason, the PM said he was unable to choose his own ministers, but that he hoped this would change after the next election. He noted that the Kurds, Shi'a and Sunnis always defend their own ministers, which makes it difficult to hold people accountable. This, stressed the PM, was not democratic and in the future he hoped Iraq would have a "true democracy" with majority rule.

Improvement at Ministries of Defense and Interior

15. (C) Regarding the Defense and Interior ministries, Maliki said these ministries had been very bad but that there had been an effort to protect Defense, Interior and Electricity from the sectarian and ethnic quota system. Maliki criticized former Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) head Paul Bremer's role in establishing those ministries, which the PM said had been "penetrated" by elements of the former regime. Previously, the ministries were "fertile" ground for "outlaws;" now it is very different. Maliki recounted a conversation with Bremer in which Maliki said he expressed concern regarding the background of Iraqis working in Qconcern regarding the background of Iraqis working in Interior and Defense. Bremer, said Maliki, told him that he knew the Iraqis better than Maliki. Nevertheless, Maliki stressed that the situation had improved and that he personally oversees the operations of these ministries. He said that the situation was not perfect, but that they were working on the shortcomings.

16. (C) Senator Whitehouse asked Maliki whether the PM could assure that there will be a peaceful political transition following national elections. The PM replied that he had full confidence that the transition would be peaceful. The situation, he said, has settled and elections would take place in a peaceful environment similar to what occurred in provincial elections.

Agriculture

17. (SBU) Maliki noted Senator Leahy's membership on the Agriculture Committee, telling the CODEL that Iraq needs technical assistance from the U.S. to modernize its agricultural system. He suggested that this be included

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under the SFA. Iraq, he said, had been known as a fertile agricultural country but its agriculture has deteriorated because of war. As a result of the crisis in Iraq's rural economy, farmers have migrated to the cities, abandoning their farms, and increasing pressure on the urban economy. The GOI, Maliki added, has allocated \$18 billion to develop agriculture.

18. (SBU) Senator Leahy replied that it is critical that nations be able to produce food within their own borders, and reviewed U.S. experience regarding government support for agriculture. Maliki noted that he had been a farmer, and said the government needed to find ways to encourage farmers. He cited initiatives such as providing credit to farmers via an agricultural bank, and establishing agricultural cooperatives. Maliki also mentioned the need for financial assistance for date and rice farmers, and the need to provide incentives for farmers to stay on farms. Low water levels are also a major problem, he said, and Iraq is looking at new technologies to deal with this issue. The PM added that Iraq is looking at a new technology that uses salt water to irrigate wheat. The PM complained that Iraqi farmers are having trouble competing because neighboring countries produce high quality products that they dump on the Iraqi market at low prices. As a result, said the PM, Iraq needs to consider establishing a tariff system to protect Iraqi agricultural products and allow Iraqi farmers to compete.

19. (SBU) Senator Warner expressed hope that Iraq's market would develop to the point that farmers can make money and be self-sustaining. The PM replied that the GOI had trouble with other services, including water and electricity. Under the previous regime, services were provided without cost to Iraqi consumers. This was not sustainable, and the GOI has introduced fees. As the economy has improved, citizens are now able to pay.

10. (SBU) CODEL Leahy did not have the opportunity to clear

this message.
HILL